

Psychiatric hospitals

Going to hospital for psychiatric treatment

Most people living with mental illness will never need to go to hospital for treatment. But if you do have to go, hospital can be the best place for you to rest, feel safe and receive the help you need.

Staff at the hospital are trained to help you get through what can be a stressful time for you and your family.

Why do people go to hospital?

People go to hospital when they can't cope with their mental illness symptoms at home and need more intensive help.

That might be because they are:

- injured or have physical symptoms from self-harm, alcohol or drug use, or eating disorders
- experiencing hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that are not there)
- having thoughts of hurting themselves or others
- feeling really sad, really frightened, or out of control.

In hospital, you can feel safe, be in close contact with doctors and nurses, get medications right (if you need medication) and have some treatments you can't get at home.

Types of hospitals

In Australia there are psychiatric units in major public hospitals, as well as specialist psychiatric hospitals that can be public or private.

In New Zealand, all psychiatric hospitals except for the Ashburn Clinic in Dunedin are part of the public system.

Public hospitals are free for citizens and some overseas visitors.

Private hospitals charge fees for their services.

- More about private health insurance and hospitals (Australia)

yourhealthinmind.org/insurance

What do I need to know before going to hospital?

What to bring

Each hospital will have a list of suggested things you should or shouldn't bring in.

The most important things to bring are:

- your Medicare card, Health Care Card or concession card (Australia)
- details of any private health insurance you hold
- test results and scans
- any medications, supplements or vitamins you take.

Ask about what personal items you or a family/whānau member can bring in to make your stay more comfortable.

You'll need some regular clothes and shoes to wear during the day, not just pyjamas. Unlike in a general hospital, where you might be in bed a lot, in a psychiatric ward you can walk around as normal.

Visitors

All hospitals allow visitors. Generally there will be set visiting hours. You will usually also be welcome to leave the hospital for a few hours or overnight, depending on your treatment plan.

What to tell work

You are entitled to use sick leave while you're in hospital. Some people also choose to use annual leave or unpaid leave if they are away from work for a longer time.

The hospital will give you a medical certificate to cover the time you're in hospital.

Admission

Admission to a public psychiatric unit is usually through the emergency department, or the hospital's community mental health team.

For a private hospital you need your GP (family doctor) or a psychiatrist to arrange admission for you.

If you need an interpreter, the hospital can organise this for you.

Intake and assessment

When you come into hospital, you will be shown around and given information about what will happen during your stay.

You will meet with a psychiatrist or a registrar (a doctor training to be a psychiatrist), who will talk to you about your concerns.

This could include:

- talking to you about your thoughts, feelings and symptoms
- asking about how you're currently coping
- asking about your medical history
- asking you some questions to test your attention and concentration.

The doctor may also want to talk to your family, partner or friends. They will ask your permission first.

They may do some blood tests, brain scans or other tests.

In New Zealand, Māori patients under Māori mental health may be met by a kaumātua or kuia and welcomed into the hospital.

What happens day-to-day?

Activities and treatments

Early in your stay you will meet your psychiatrist and the members of the treatment team.

Once you have been in hospital for a little while, you and the team will put together a treatment plan.

Depending on why you've come into hospital, your day will vary quite a bit.

Some people need lots of rest and quiet time away from other people. Others need to start to socialise with others in organised group activities.

Everyone will have a routine that suits their current situation and goals for treatment.

All treatments and activities in hospital are aimed at helping you recover.

For example, there might be:

- one-on-one discussions with a psychiatrist, psychologist or nurse
- group discussions
- occupational therapy
- art and music therapy
- exercise
- relaxation and meditation
- time for self-reflection

- opportunities to leave the hospital to visit family or friends.

If it's part of your treatment plan, you will receive medication at regular times during the day.

Many hospitals offer a range of other therapies, such as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) or repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS). If your psychiatrist thinks these could help you, they will discuss this with you first.

Surroundings

In a psychiatric hospital, you are free to walk around and wear your regular clothes.

Usually there will be an outside area, a place where you can watch TV and talk to some of the other patients, a dining area and a nurse's station.

While private rooms are becoming more common, you may still have to share a room or a bathroom with someone else.

Staff members

Your treatment team will usually include a psychiatrist, and may also include:

- a doctor training to be a psychiatrist (called a psychiatry registrar)
- nurses
- a psychologist
- an occupational therapist
- a social worker.

The team may also include dietitians, occupational therapists and music therapists.

In New Zealand there may also be a spiritual or family/whānau consultant.

The nurses on the ward will be in close contact with you. They will provide counselling to you and your family, and support you if you're feeling stressed.

You will see your psychiatrist regularly, along with other types of therapists to help with different parts of your treatment.

There will be staff members available at all times of the day and night.

“In a sense, [going into hospital] is a relief. You can't stress about work, or running here or there. Your job while you're there is to reclaim your life, to learn skills to better handle the things that might have brought you there in the first place.”

Abby Heugel

How long will I be in hospital?

The length of time you'll be in hospital really depends on why you're there, the treatments you need and how you're responding.

Some people only stay a day or two. Others may stay for 2–3 weeks or longer.

People who haven't been in a psychiatric ward before sometimes worry they may never be able to leave. That never happens these days.

What happens after I leave hospital?

Being in hospital is just one part of your recovery.

Before and after you're in hospital you might have home visits, telephone or internet case-management and appointments for psychological and medical treatment.

A social worker can help if you're worried about accommodation after you leave hospital.

Can I be treated without my consent?

Sometimes a mental illness can become so severe that the person with the illness may not even realise they are unwell.

If someone is so sick they don't understand they need treatment, and if not having the treatment would put them (or others) in danger, the law allows that person to be treated involuntarily.

This means they can be kept in hospital (if necessary) and treated, even though they say they don't agree to it.

To make sure this only happens when it's absolutely necessary, the law requires that doctors present a case for this in front of a tribunal (or, in New Zealand, a judge).

The law also protects your rights. You have the right to legal representation and in some cases this is provided for free. (In New Zealand all cases under mental health compulsory treatment orders receive free legal representation.)

You have the right to be seen regularly by your psychiatrist and to have contact with family/whānau.

Each Australian state and territory and New Zealand have their own mental health acts, which set out these rights and the other rules that doctors must obey.

Seclusion and restraint

Seclusion or restraint may be used when a person is acting violently and the person, other patients or staff members are at risk.

Seclusion is where a person is kept alone in a room or area where they are unable to leave.

Restraint is where a person is physically restricted from moving around, for example by someone holding them, through medication, or by being strapped down.

Seclusion and restraint are a last resort where all other options to keep people safe have been tried or considered. Both should be very rare.

The RANZCP's position is that the use of seclusion and restraint should be reduced and where possible removed entirely.

Your rights in hospital

Tell hospital staff if you are uncomfortable with any part of your treatment or are unsure of anything.

While in hospital, you have the right to:

- privacy
- safety
- respect for your cultural identity
- ask questions about your treatments and medications and their side effects
- know your diagnosis, and disagree with it
- get a second opinion (this could be at your own cost)
- refuse treatment (though if you are under an involuntary order your doctors may end up insisting on some medications)
- make a complaint
- have a family/whānau member, friend, family consultant or anyone you choose to help you ask questions.

Help for families/whānau

If you have a family member or friend who is in hospital, you can be involved in the person's treatment, with their permission.

Most hospitals will have workers whose main job is to help families learn about the person's illness, find community supports and work out how to best use the health-care system.

Remember

- ✓ Your care and treatment in hospital will be matched to your needs.
- ✓ You will be involved in putting together a treatment plan, even if you are being treated involuntarily.
- ✓ The main aim of everyone you meet in hospital will be to help you and your family as much as possible.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

Published April 2017 © RANZCP | C1026V1

About us

Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



The Royal
Australian &
New Zealand
College of
Psychiatrists



This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.